

THE UNIVERSITY GARDENS
TEXAS WOMAN'S UNIVERSITY
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The Texas Woman's University Gardens have been a wildflower sanctuary since the 1930's. The original Rock Garden and Botanical Garden were established by the Exterior Beautification Committee of the Texas State College for Women. It was comprised of Miss Willie Isabella Birge, Director of the Department of Biology; Mr. Fred Westcourt, Director of the Department of Rural Arts; and Miss Mary Marshall, Director of the Department of Art. Miss Birge, well-known throughout Texas for her lectures on flowers and gardens, dreamed of paying tribute to the bountiful beauty which nature provides through the native flowers, plants, shrubs, and trees of the State of Texas. She started the Botanical Garden with a pound and a half of flower seeds and such plants as nature provided around the college grounds. A beautiful Rock Garden, to be located at the edge of the campus' Lowry Woods, was designed by Miss Marshall. The bedding plants for the Gardens were grown in the college greenhouse under Mr. Westcourt's direction and were planted in the Gardens by his and Miss Birge's students.¹

The Gardens were planned and landscaped so as to show many different types of native plants that grow in Texas climates and planned so as to have color the year 'round. Although the Gardens are used primarily to promote the conservation and growth of Texas native plants, specimens were also included from other parts of the world. The Gardens were established on a three-quarter acre site on a hillside in the midst of the great native oak trees. The famous TWU Little-Chapel-in-the-Woods was built

adjacent to the Gardens in 1938 and became an important complement to them. The Garden site, interlaced by paths and retaining walls made of native stone, had several spring-fed waterways and formal and informal ponds and was a showplace of the area. Many visitors drove many miles just to spend a few tranquil hours there.² The Gardens and the Chapel marked the beginning of Redbud Lane, which in its winding through the campus was once bordered by 2000 redbud trees.

Through the years subsequent to World War II, however, the Gardens became neglected and, finally, overgrown. Even so, special specimen trees grew to be mighty ones; and many varieties of land and water plants persevered. Restoration of the gardens was listed as a prime goal by Dr. Mary Evelyn Blagg Huey shortly after she was named president of TWU in 1976. Urged and supported by alumnae all over the nation, she began planning with the Campus Beautification Committee. In 1977, Mr. J. Brough Miller of the TWU Art Department and Chairman of the Campus Beautification Committee, discovered some of the original rock structures while working to remove an overgrowth of the bamboo which had originally been the background screen to separate the Gardens from campus maintenance buildings. Further investigation uncovered rock benches, ponds, and watercourses.³ With these discoveries, others came to realize the potential of the existing resource; and the idea of restoring the Gardens to their initial beauty accelerated. This restoration project attracted the attention and interest of many people throughout the Denton community and Texas alike.

Although there are many people responsible for the TWU Gardens, it was through the original planning and efforts of Miss Willie Birge, Mr. Fred

Westcourt, Miss Elida Pearson, Miss Mary Marshall, Miss Viola Hamilton, and Miss Nette Schultz that those involved in the renovation have been able to secure the natural beauty that abides there. Through the continued efforts of such people as Mr. W. V. Rainey of W. V. Rainey Greenhouses, Inc. (who worked in the Gardens as a youth); Mr. Carroll Abbott, noted wildflower preservationist and consultant and adjunct instructor for the University; Dr. Robert Collier, Dean of the College of Natural and Social Sciences and Chairman of the Texas Wildflower Day Committee; Dr. William Beale, Botany Instructor and Building and Grounds Supervisor; Miss Gertrude Gibson, Director of Development; Mr. J. Brough Miller; and Dr. Mary Evelyn Blagg Huey, the TWU Gardens have again become a landmark of beauty and a State Sanctuary for wildflowers today.⁴ Much time, research, and devoted attention have gone into the nurturing of the Gardens. Their beauty and uniqueness have been recognized by many nature lovers statewide; and, in April of 1980, the TWU Gardens were declared a wildflower preserve by Governor William P. Clements.⁵

The Texas Woman's University recognizes that the beauty of its native plants has enriched the history of our State and the lives of its people. Thus, it has a strong commitment to the conservation, dissemination, and appreciation of our State's wildflowers. From this commitment, strong advocacy developed within the University community to support the statutory designation of a State Wildflower Day. Pots specially designed and made by students in ceramics classes in the Art Department were filled with Texas' lace cactus plants provided by Mr. Carroll Abbott. These were given to Legislators and State administrative officials to enhance their awareness of Texas' native plants and their beauty. Governor Clements proclaimed the fourth Saturday of April of each year

as the official State Wildflower Day in 1980; and in 1981 the Legislature of Texas established its designation in statute.⁶ The TWU Gardens are the site for the annual official observance of the day, and it features a "plant-in" which has been attended by 150 - 200 people in its first two years. Seedlings prepared by students in the University botany class, "Texas Wildflowers, Growth and Maintenance," are planted in prepared beds; and each participant is given seedlings to take for planting at home. Organization of the Texas Native Plant Society in 1980 has been an additional product of the Gardens project, and it now has 480 members from throughout the State--enthusiastic supporters of Texas' native flora and of the TWU Gardens.⁷

The gardens serve a four-fold purpose. First, the area serves as an educational laboratory for the University's students, as well as for the citizens of the State. Secondly, they provide a sanctuary to preserve an important part of Texas' natural history and provide testimony to citizen interest in that preservation. Third, they serve as research and trial gardens to find suitable plants for use in other areas of the TWU campus and of Texas. Finally, the Gardens provide a place of pleasure and recreation for students and visitors.

Both extensive and varied, the wildflower and botanical gardens on the TWU campus bring a picture of constantly changing beauty. For some 50 years, the Gardens have provided a unique site for the appreciation, conservation, and promotion of the native plants of Texas. Their preservation and continuance will provide a valuable heritage for our State in years to come.

FOOTNOTES

1. Daedalian (College Annual). (Denton: Texas State College for Women, 1941), pp. 3 - 10.
2. Frank Rigler, "College Gardening," Gulf Coast Gardens, August - September 1942, pp. 14-15,20; "A Modern Tula! Definite Cultural Institution of the Southwest," Southern Home and Garden, January 1942, pp. 5-6; E. V. White, Historical Record of the Texas State College for Women: The First Forty-Five Years 1903-1948. College Bulletin No. 364. Denton, 1948; Joyce Thompson, Marking a Trail: The History of the Texas Woman's University (In Press).
3. Texas Woman's University, News Release, 4 January 1977; "Texas Wonderful Wildflowers," Fort Worth Star Telegram, 8 May 1980; "About the Beautification Program for the TWU Campus," June 1977, Texas Woman's University.
4. "Texas Wildflower Day Great Success," Texas Wildflower Newsletter, Summer 1980, p.4; W. V. Rainey, interview, Denton, Texas, May 1978.
5. William P. Clements, Jr., Official Memorandum, 15 April 1980.
6. H. Con. Res. 110, 67th Texas Legislature (1981).
7. Texas Wildflower Newsletter, Summer 1981, p. 3; "Wildflowers Tip Texas With Color in the Spring," Denton Record - Chronicle, 21 April 1981; Carroll Abbott, Letter of invitation for charter membership in the Native Plant Society of Texas, 1981, Texas Woman's University. President's Office file on Native Plant Society of Texas.

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